

**M**OUNTAIN climbing is ostensibly the preserve of only the brave or crazy — those inspired, for reasons unfathomable to the rest of us, to take on frigid, oxygen-starved, crippling conditions and risk harm and death to summit the world's tallest spires. Of course, for some, even that is not enough, and the truly fearless will then leap off these, with nothing but a glorified bedsheet to break their fall.

Capetonian Andy de Klerk is famous in mountaineering circles for opening several routes at home and worldwide, often on a meagre budget, in remote, backward countries. He has climbed to the summit of some of the planet's most arduous peaks, many of them alone. Plus, he is one of the few climbers who base-jump, a fringe skydiving practice that involves parachuting from stationary objects, usually the highest cliffs. De Klerk is also a man of letters, with a Bachelor of Psychology, Anthropology and Philosophy, he recently completed an engrossing, emotive book of stories and essays about his life and adrenalin-junkie exploits.

*Sharper Edges* — chosen as a finalist in the 2007 Banff Mountain Book Festival — is full of dangerous action, such as rock falls and cliff-strikes (base-jumping's worst scenario) and broken bodies, as well as the crushed dreams of routes unconquered and the plunging despair of death at altitude.

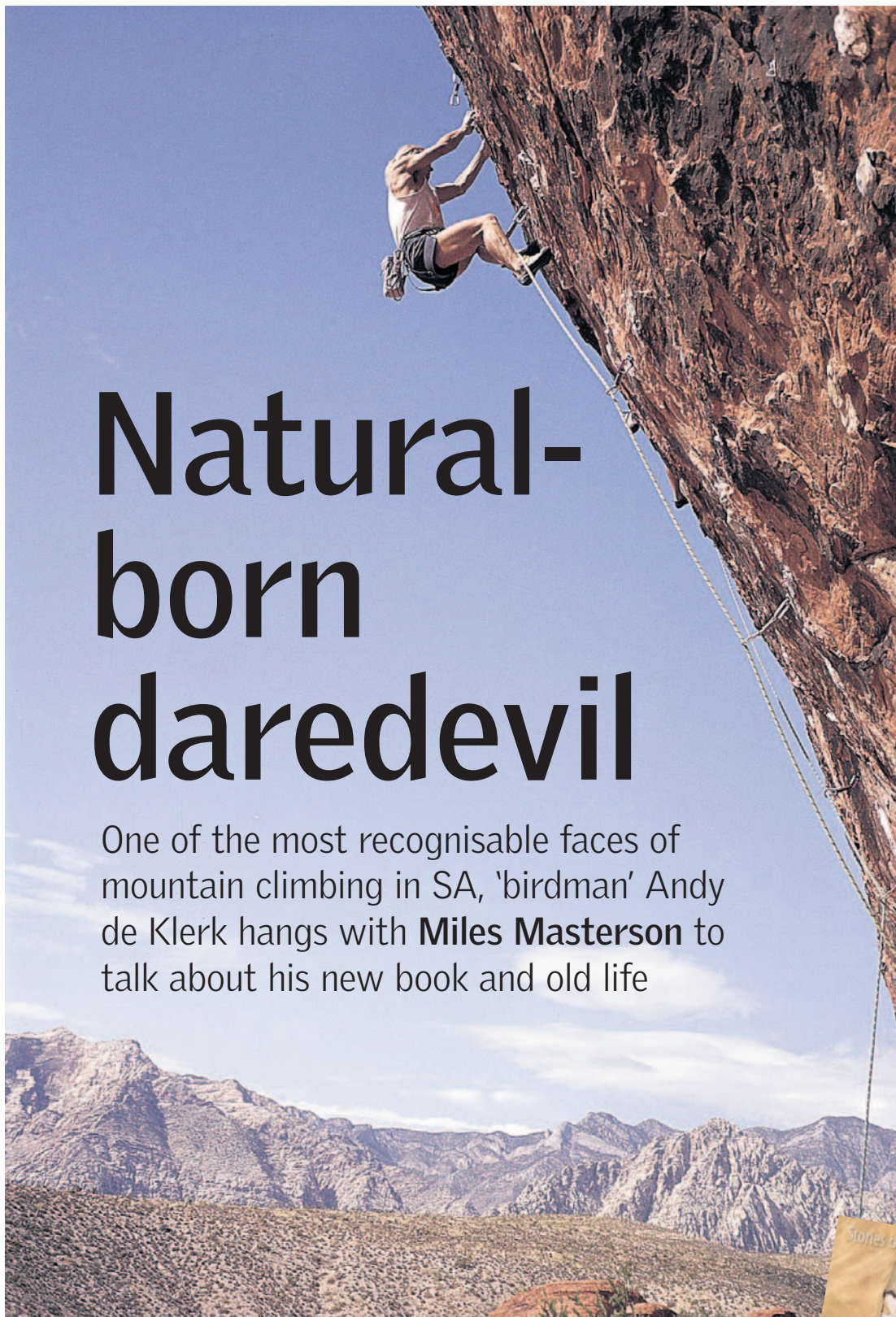
Yet the book avoids any kind of self-flattery.

However, 40-year-old De Klerk — aka 'AdK' — initially struggles to verbalise his motivations for climbing. "I've tried to think of why," he says, almost wondering aloud. "But it was clear that's what I wanted to do, even from an early age." De Klerk takes a long drag on a Chesterfield cigarette (he meets me at a coffee bar next to his new furniture store, Bamboo, clutching a half-empty ciggie box, keys and a cellphone, which he jokingly calls his "Gauteng-earring").

'Some people are not content to sit in the valley, they've got to go up to the top of the mountain and then they want to jump off'

He has just come from working his day trade, fitting cabinets. He is dressed in dusty, tight, pitch-black jeans, scuffed running shoes and a grey T-shirt. His face is lined — deeply in some places — as expected of someone who has lived a life outdoors, much of it in cruel weather. With a shock of thinning, sun-bleached hair, he looks like a fisherman, perhaps one lost in the bowels of the Mother City; but his hooded blue eyes are clear and intense when he makes a point. De Klerk moves with ease and has the calm presence of a man who has endured incredible challenges.

Maritzburg-raised De Klerk tells how his doctor dad was an alcoholic — he and his mother, a nurse, divorced when De Klerk was 12 years old. He then goes on to describe how he had been hiking in the Drakensberg with a friend's dad since he was eight, became devoted to climbing magazines and books by the likes of Reinhold Messner and Walter Bonatti, and by his early teens was scaling things regularly. "Something in me always knew I would be climbing the Himalayas one day," he reflects,



AIN'T NO MOUNTAIN HIGH ENOUGH: De Klerk in Red Rocks, near Las Vegas, Nevada



CATCHING CLOUDS: Andy de Klerk in Pakistan

adding, "I liked that it was outside, in the wild places, where it was just me." When he and his mom moved to Cape Town, De Klerk would practise under Newlands Bridge, where he met kindred spirits Greg Lacey and Ed February, two legendary SA climbers. Both eventually became his mentors and friends; Ed February in particular filled a paternal void. De Klerk admits — to me and in the book — when he needed it most.

Under their tutelage, he embraced climbing with intense dedication throughout his teens and into his early 20s. However, when he finished his degree at UCT, he was offered an Oxford scholarship. He laughs and tells me that many people are amazed he turned this down to go climbing around the world with a woman he'd just met, American Julie Brugger, who soon afterwards became his first wife. "Life is too short for regrets," he justifies bluntly. "I would like to have done both, but I made that choice and I stick by it." Brugger, of course, appears in the book often. After nine years together, the couple drifted apart, but not without climbing together on a number of routes, including the infamous 'Dru' in the Swiss Alps, where they first crossed paths.

This region, rich in climbing lore, also features a lot in *Sharper Edges*, it's where De Klerk has had many triumphant, and scary, climbing moments. "It's quite an unstable part of the Alps." He holds up his gnarled hands, setting the scene: "It's all frozen rock; and I was rappelling down at three in the morning, first light, and there's a big rock fall... and all the rocks missed me." He holds a hand very near his shoulder to demonstrate. On a roll, he then dredges up an-

other shocking tale, this time when climbing a difficult route in the Canadian Rockies. "It was really sharp limestone, like a knife... and the whole block I was on came off. It slipped onto my lap and cut through my two 9mm-ropes," he says. "It cut clean through one and halfway through the other. You are 1 000 meters off the ground, and your rope gets cut, and that's you — dead." But de Klerk lived to tell the tale.

Apart from these climbing mishaps, he has also had and seen his fair share of mixed fortunes in base-jumping. The book's first chapter, *Bird People*, is an account of how good friend Karl Hayden barely survived a cliff-strike on Table Mountain, as well as De Klerk's own story of how he broke his knee, jumping at the infamous Milner Peak in the Hex River Mountains. "What is it about our yearning to fly like birds that makes it worth the trauma, heartache and pain?" he writes, before answering his own question. "It's because bird people simply love to fly. It gives us glorious freedom to soar above our own given element, and nothing

makes us feel as intently alive."

It is precisely this affirmation of living, rather than confrontation of mortality, says De Klerk (a self-confessed atheist), that is for him the whole point. "It's a celebration of life, but in a rather odd way," he says. "Some people are not content to sit in the valley, they've got to go up to the top of the mountain and then they want to jump off."

"I mean, when you are standing on the edge, you don't really want to... but at the same time have to, because if you don't, it will be worse. And it's more confronting your fear; challenging goals within myself — my own drive and ambition, rather than a fear of death, or fear of anything."

Now settled in Scarborough, he is married to Charlotte Noble, an athlete who once came fifth in the Comrades Marathon; they have four young children. His family, he says, have made him really appreciate making it this far. He has slowed down considerably, although he scratches the base-jumping itch occasionally, and still skydives and climbs. "I've started taking my five-year-old son climbing and it is awesome," he says. "He just loves it, so my passion is turning to joy, because I am sharing it with my children."

To support his family, (having taken up cabinet-making years ago to fund his climbing), De Klerk now also runs Cabinetworks, a furniture company with a multi-million-rand turnover and 35 employees across South Africa. A somewhat reluctant businessman, who has done his best to avoid the world of commerce and material gain, he is amazed at its quick growth.

"I have surrounded myself with talented people and given them a little direction and it has blossomed," he says humbly (a good measure of his lack of vanity comes from a receptionist at his store, who told me, while I was waiting to meet him, that she didn't know anything about his climbing achievements until she had read *Sharper Edges*).

Winding down from his once-relentless globetrotting schedule also gave him the opportunity to finally write his book. Although

it has been well received by those climbers and non-climbers who have read it, he is somewhat ambivalent about the writing process. He underplays the end result. "Deconstructing the 'extreme world' is not an intellectual challenge," he explains.

"But at least I was able to share some of the lessons I've learned along the way — about success and

failure, and about what it means to have spent time in some wild places far from home."

Ultimately, De Klerk and *Sharper Edges* are perhaps summed up best in an excerpt from one of the book's most poignant chapters: *An Instant of Joy*, which is about a solo climb on the north face of the infamous Eiger in the Alps, a story De Klerk says goes right to the heart of what he was trying to achieve.

"I had risked everything to get there," he writes, "only to discover that there had been nothing there for me in the first place. It was like I had been trying to catch a cloud with my hands."

"I suppose I had been looking for something more, but there really is nothing to find on the summit of a mountain other than yourself." — © Miles Masterson

● *Sharper Edges* is published by Jonathan Ball, R140.